

Henry James's View on Fiction

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Henry James is still a key figure in an argument, which he himself helped to initiate, about the nature and function of fiction and its relation to life. The argument is based upon the assumption that "reality" is contingent, shapeless, various, inexplicable, capricious--in this all the parties agree, though, as we shall see in a moment, James dealt with certain problems for the "intelligent painter of life"¹ implicit in such a notion by insisting on two different meanings of the term "life" and by adopting when necessary a definition that enabled him (he thought) to take his place in the mimetic tradition. The disagreement itself has concerned the relations of this contingent reality to art, with one side insisting that art faithfully imitates, the other that it abrogates, that reality.

In the first stand we get the preoccupation with verisimilitude that with the exception of the symbolist movement was generally typical of nineteenth-century art and that persists to this day--the more or less complete, externalized, and naturalistic description of "real" persons and their ordinary physical, temporal, and social milieu. Thus, in an article he wrote, H. G. Wells attacks James's formal concerns, accusing him of seeking a specious unity in his works, whereas

if the novel is to follow life it must be various and discursive. Life is diversity and entertainment, not completeness and satisfaction. All actions are half-hearted, shot delightfully with wandering thoughts--about something else. All true stories are a felt of irrelevances. But James sets out to make his novels with the presupposition that they can be made continuously relevant.²

Similarly, Edith Wharton wrote,

I was naturally much interested in James's technical theories and experiments, though I thought, and still think, that he tended to sacrifice to them that spontaneity which is the life of fiction. Everything, in the latest novels, had to be fitted into a predestined design.³

In the second stand we get the more abstract preoccupation with the creation of an aesthetic artifact that began in the 1850's and is generally typical of twentieth-century art--an emphasis on patterns, structures (of whatever kind), forms, and the properties of, forms such as balance, antithesis, repetition, contrast. Such preoccupation leads finally to the notion that invention--the operations of the imagination and arbitrary creation of forms--is itself the subject of art, a notion that is antimimetic in that it constitutes a rejection of the "lifelike" or "natural" in favor of creation, as Alain Robbe-Grillet says, "without a model."⁴

This distinction between approaches to art has to be understood as one of degree, not kind. It may be true, as Ortega y Gasset insists, that perception "of 'lived' reality and perception of artistic form are essentially incompatible because they call for a different adjustment of

our perceptive apparatus," but all perception involves the transformation and organization by the mind of data received from the world. Similarly, anyone's notion of what constitutes the "lifelike" (or quotidian reality), let alone the imitation of it in art, itself involves selection, patterning, and the imposition of structure. The mediated experience of the external world, the making of forms which constitute both that experience and our knowledge of and responses to it, is the characteristically human activity. And since this is the case, there is a "model" for the act of creation or form-making in the ordinary operations of the mind, which may be said to mine itself when engaged in the conscious creation of an aesthetic artifact. All its activities are "creative" in this sense.

The distinction of the approaches is nevertheless useful in categorizing different modes of form-making engaged in by the mind in its creative activity, in particular the degree to which these approximate the results (i. e. the specificity of ordinary perception) or the process of its own activities. It is perhaps, as Ortega suggests, a matter of adjustment of focus, since in either mode the other is implicit: there are "patterns" (of selection, rhythm, whatever) in "realistic" novels, and there is texture, sensuousness, and particularity in even the most abstract of artifacts. Nevertheless, in a given work one mode will be predominant.

James himself falls into the formal mode, though he sought for a certain balance. He acknowledged and admired the "energy directly exhibited" (a quality not characteristic of his own art) of realists like Leo Tolstoy, Wells, and Arnold Bennett and praised them for bringing into fiction a "saturation and possession" of the common human sense that had been absent for three or four generations. And he insisted that this capacity constituted "on behalf of the novelists, as on that of any painter of things seen, felt or imagined, just one-half of his authority."⁶ But the other half of this authority lay in the use to which this capacity for rendering the denseness and particularity of life was put: there must, he wrote in 1914, be some controlling "centre of the interest," some "pointed intention," some "sense of the whole"⁷ behind the selection of any and every detail. A picture "without composition," he writes,

slights its most precious chance for beauty There may in its absence be life, incontestably, as ... Tolstoy's "Peace and War" [and "Les Trois Mousquetaires."] have it; but what do such large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically *mean*? There is life and life, and as waste is only life sacrificed and thereby prevented from "counting," I delight in a deep-breathing economy and an organic form. ⁸

"Life" in this second sense--the sense that James insists his art renders--is thus diametrically opposed to that variety, abundance, energy, messiness, and contingency that characterize the image of reality held in common by all these writers we have mentioned--whatever their stance about art--as well as by later writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. James too shares this fiction, in so far as it applies to life: "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so."¹⁰ Or again, "No action [in fiction] was ever made historically vivid without a certain *fictitious compactness*" (italics mine).¹¹ In relation to art, he is quite insistent upon his rejection of the chance, the artist indulges in must not only be "*indispensable* to the interest" (italics his)¹² but "rigorously so."

James thus shares with a certain group of moderns--Sartre, Andre Gide, Camus, Robbe-

Grillet-- the notion that at least so far as its formal properties patterns of coherence, shapes, structures with a beginning, middle, and end that are not to be found in life. (Hence, perhaps, James's irritation when, once he had picked up a "germ" for a story or from a piece of gossip briefly delineating a situation, his hostess would try to him the outcome and details of what "really" happened.)¹³ James himself of course repeatedly insists upon the intimate connection between art and life. In the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, he emphasizes "the perfect dependence of the 'moral' sense of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it"¹⁴ and in the Preface to *The Ambassadors*, he writes, "Art deals with what we see, it must first contribute full-handed that ingredient; it plucks its material in the garden of life--which material elsewhere grown is stable and uneatable."¹⁵ But the amount of "felt life" evoked comes down ultimately to "the artist's prime sensibility," the "quality and capacity" of which represent the work's "projected morality." This attribute itself is finally viewed by James as "some mark made on the intelligence." In other words, the measure of "life" in a work of art for James turns out to be the intensity and complexity of the consciousness that is operating upon the material it receives from the external world. From this vantage point, notions like "masculine reciprocity"¹⁶ are not only irrelevant but needlessly confusing: they tell us nothing about James's art for better or for worse, and ask us to bring to bear upon that art standards that obscure, not clarify, its nature.

What is extraordinary is the amount of vituperation that has been heaped on his head for this attention to formal concerns and for what has seemed to a number of critics to be a consequent attenuation in the vitality (and moral worth) of his works. For example, F. R. Leavis writes on *The Golden Bowl*:

It is as if his interest in his material had been too specialized, too much concentrated on certain limited kinds of possible development, and as if in the technical elaboration expressing this specialized interest he had lost his full sense of life and let his moral taste slip into abeyance. ¹⁷

There is, of course, a general tendency in English and American criticism to insist that fiction follows the tradition, laid by Wells and others, of drawing from and depicting dense social reality for the purpose of offering "a help to conduct" or "a means of union among men joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity."¹⁸ But this tendency alone does not, I feel, sufficiently account for the general irritation with James for his concern with form a concern that has become a commonplace of serious modern art.

A factor equally as important, I think, is the degree to which James is, but has been insufficiently recognized as being, a transitional figure straddling two historical periods and sharing some characteristics with each, often to the annoyance of readers from both periods. In some ways, he is the first "modern" novelist in English: in his awareness of, attention to, and deliberate experiment with modes of composition; in his use of controlling "point of view"¹⁹ and the consequent objectification of patterns of consciousness as the major characteristic of his art; in his concern with aesthetic and formal ends; in his insistence upon the freedom of the artist to be granted and judged in terms of his *donee*²⁰ and to serve no other master than art itself; in his rendering of a multiplicity of viewpoints without positing some final objective truth; in his upending of traditional moral categories in the service of a demonic imagination; in his preoccupation with extreme and perverse states of sensibility; and even, it could be argued, in the very qualities of tediousness, effectness, ennui, monotony, and

stylistic elaborateness that can make him so exasperating to read even while he is fascinating (sometimes the exasperation is one of the sources of the fascination).

And finally it is precisely his lack of a conscious avantgarde attitude that, in spite of the remarkable Prefaces, keeps us from regarding James as a direct founder of modernism. He of course bore enormous direct influence on writers like Edith Wharton and Joseph Conrad.²¹ Gide wrote about James, and was to have met him in 1915 in England (though he abandoned the trip at the last moment); he had a long talk about him with Charles du Bos in Paris in 1920 and more than once used James's title "the figure in the carpet" as an image for someone he was discussing.²² James Joyce refers to James in passing in a review of another novelist.²³ Claims have been made for his influence even on Ernest Hemingway.²⁴

But in spite of his acquaintance with French literature, James was hostile to that revolutionary movement, symbolism (many of whose concerns he profoundly shared), which began with the publication of Charles Baudelaire's translations of Edgar Allan Poe's tales in 1852 and which marked the conscious shift into the modern literary sensibility. He never wrote an essay on Poe—a conspicuous gap in his writings on American letters, as Leon Edel points out in the Introduction to *The American Essays of Henry James*--and his essay on Baudelaire, first published in 1878, was supercilious and unappreciative.²⁵ Of Edmond de Goncourt, who shared Baudelaire's aesthetic aims as well as what Erich Auerbach characterizes as his "sensory fascination of the ugly, the repulsive, and the morbid"²⁶ James wrote in 1877 that his "fault is not that he is serious or historical or scientific or instructive, but that he is intolerably unclean."²⁷

Such a remark, in view of James's own proclivity toward if not the "ugly" at least the strange, the extreme, the bizarre, the "perverse" on the one hand, and defeat, loss, destruction, renunciation on the other is remarkable. As is his distaste for that poet of "radical evil," Baudelaire. But what is even more remarkable is the moralistic ambience to the term "unclean" --coming from a man who would himself twenty years later be called "disgusting" for the things he exposed children to in his fiction. An analogous kind of comment on *Madame Bovary*, made in 1874, is equally odd but finally, when try to characterize James's contradictory affinities in order to place him historically, instructive:

"*Madame Bovary*," we confess, has always seemed to us a great work, and capable really of being applied to educational purposes. It is an elaborate picture of vice, but it represents it as indefeasibly commingled with misery that in a really enlightened system of education it would from exactly the volume to put into the hands of young persons in whom vicious tendencies had been distinctly perceived, and who were wavering as to which way they should let the balance fall. ²⁸

These remarks, of course, date from a time when James was just beginning his career as a novelist. Nevertheless, these early attitudes in their tendentious, almost pompous, and certainly unexamined conventionality betray the side of James that seemed to remain frozen in the official "false consciousness" of Victorian culture.²⁹ He is of course quite correct in saying (in the Baudelaire piece) that "morality" is hardly something you can put into or take out of fiction as if it were a colored liquid, but later he was to define that term more subtly, in terms of intensity, the evocation of "felt life," and the quality and capacity of the artist's sensibility--not in terms of "vice" or the "thousand indecencies and impurities of life" that make art seem "base and hungry, starving, desperate as one who has wasted her substance in riotous living" if she deals with (or in James's word "overhauls")

them.³⁰ The later definition makes room for a preoccupation with "impurities" and evil, since the standards have shifted from the content of the vision to its sincerity, complexity, and intelligence: "No good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind; that seem to me an axiom which, for the artist in fiction, will cover all needful moral ground."³¹

James thus embodied some of the ferocious contradictions of his age and undermined others. But though he was first great experimentalist in the art of fiction, he never reached the point of deliberate innovation and breaking with the past that characterized the early moderns like Marcel Proust, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner, nor were his formal experimentations accompanied by an explicit metaphysic. Only after the outbreak of World War I, near the end of his life, did he consciously dissociate himself from and impugn the past, giving vent to nihilistic and despairing sentiments about the treachery of history, civilization, and nature. He never seemed to have faced the degree to which he had long since sloughed off some of the more comforting presuppositions of his time and taken up residence in the uncertain and ambiguous universe of the present.

All form implies a metaphysic, whether or not it is conscious or easily discernible. As Robbe-Grillet, Ortega, and others have pointed out, the typical nineteenth-century novel was predicated upon and projected an image of "a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entirely decipherable universe"—an image that was revealed by and implicit in such technical aspects of these works as "systematic use of the past tense and the third person, unconditional adoption of chronological development, linear plots, regular trajectory of the passions, impulse of each episode toward a conclusion."³²

The "order" that was the form of the work was a symbol of the "order" posited of the universe. In the great Victorian novelists, this connection and the world view itself were largely unconscious. In contrast, in the modern novel, what is lacking is not the "anecdote" but "only its character of certainty [and therefore that of the world image implied by it], its tranquility, its innocence."³³ The uncertainty is, moreover, explicit and conscious. Speaking of our "unintelligible and limited universe," Camus writes that "today people despair of true knowledge This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction."³⁴

The form of works like *Nausea* and *The Stranger* stands in deliberate ironic juxtaposition to the formless, irrational, unintelligible, contingent reality that these novels posit. It is this ironical structuring of events that Robbe-Grillet misses when he charges both Sartre and Camus with a "fatal complicity" with the universe.³⁵ Just as nausea was, so absurdity is "really a form of tragic humanism. It is not an observation of the separation between man and things The world [in *The Stranger*] is accused of complicity in a murder."³⁶ This is simply wrong. The conjunction of the man overly sensitive to the sun, with a gun in his hand, in oppressively hot surroundings, and a waiting victim, is accidental. These figures in conjunction create a design, but it is one without meaning; it has or consists merely of formal properties.

What the design does (and this is reinforced by the book's elaborate and rather tediously obvious metaphorical structure superimposed upon the chronological one--the pattern formed by the images of light, heat, and glare, increasing in intensity, climaxed at the murder scene) is to create the appearance of complicity where there in fact none, the illusion that the murder was brought about by the heartless or diabolic intent of some intelligent force in the

universe. The illusion, moreover, is intensified by the way in which not only nature but all events—Meursault's chance encounters, the witnesses and their interpretations of the meaning of his gestures, timing—seem to conspire to condemn him. But clearly implicit in the idea of the "absurd" is the human need to ascribe purposeful design to the accidental. "This world," Camus writes, "in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart."³⁷

The design (the pattern of intensifying light and heat) woven by Meursault's susceptibilities out of random occurrences is as objectively meaningless—that is to say false, fictional—as that of the witnesses (who ascribe various "meanings" to certain of his appearances, words, responses). The hero and his antagonists are all poets, creating the illusion of meaning, in this case of a demonic nature, where there is none. As in James's *The Sacred Fount* all that is required is some kind of closed system that seems to explain the facts.

The emotional effect of the work is in part due to the ironic contrast between the logic (which suggests a meaning, a point, an explanation) of these designs and their fictionality. These techniques are aimed not only at first invoking then breaking down the ordinary distinction between illusion and reality, but also at making that breakdown conscious and in concretizing it. We are forced to experience the contradiction between expectations traditionally appropriate to the fictional on the one hand and the real on the other, and this clash is the point. Art has its own capacity to suggest order and significance through illusion, and we recognize—though that does not mean we have to cease to admire it—as mere illusion.

Though James shares with moderns the assumption that art is structured in a way that life is not, he does not, as they do, deliberately undercut its order and coherency or play it off against the disorder and absurdity of life. He recognizes the arbitrariness of form—that "geometry of his own" which the artist constructs—but the recognition only occasionally (as in *The Sacred Fount*) entails self-mockery, and certainly neither anxiety nor anguish. On the contrary, he accepts the discrepancy between art and life as a matter of course and, at the same time, with all seriousness and dedication in his role as "the Master."

He is a great ironist, but his irony by and large does not spring from or concern itself with a consciousness of his own aesthetic assumptions, processes, or artifacts. And though his books in some respects betray a much more radical ontological stance than he seemed conscious of or ever directly expressed until his heartbreak and disillusion upon the outbreak of World War I, in other respects they remain rooted in the past. The universe postulated by his fiction, for example, is not only an ordered one—this he shares with the Victorian novelists—but, like Thomas Hardy's, it is almost overdetermined. In James's world, the contingent becomes the necessary; his designs are as wrought and as taut as those in *The Stranger*, but we are meant in his case to believe in the design, not perceive it as a kind of ghastly illusion that toys with our sense of coherence.

There is, nevertheless, behind the richness of texture, the sensuous particularity, the superb and often satirical discriminations of national styles and manners so characteristic of his work, plenty of the ghastly lurking in James's lustrous visions. For—unlike in the Victorian novel, with its ultimately serene triumph of the good—the order that is seen to operate is a negative, a diabolic one, a geometry of destruction, an order, as he wrote in the Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, of "Fates, powers conspiring to a sinister end and, with their command of means, finally achieving it."³⁹ If any order—even an order of pain—is

better than none or the mocking semblance of one, then James's vision is more positive than some of our contemporaries whose mockery he helped prepare for by his play with form, his delight in the perverse, and his demonic capacity to render reality ("represent life" or "produce the illusion of life" in James's own words)⁴⁰ from varied, constricting, conflicting, perspectives.

Notes

1 Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, ed. R. P. Blackmur (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 224.

2 H. G. Wells, "Of Art, of Literature, of Henry James," *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature*, eds. Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr. (New York: Oxford Univ. press, 1965), p. 326

3 Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 190.

4 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1956), p. 32.

5 Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1956), p. 23. He explains the difference in "adjustment" by an analogy of the eye focusing on the windowpane, hence blurring the reality beyond it, or ignoring, forgetting the existence of the window and seeing only the three-dimensional real world outside. The latter is his image of the typical nineteenth-century activity in art, the former of twentieth-century activity.

6 *The Modern Tradition*, p. 318.

7 *Ibid*, p. 320.

8 *The Art of the Novel*, p. 84.

9 Which "counts" when it counts "to someone," makes a mark or impression on (if possible) a "finely registering mind." James's second definition of life really comes down this: a response of consciousness. Hence his preference for rendering "somebody's impression" of the "affair at hand" rather than that affair itself.

10 *The Art of the Novel*, p. 5.

11 *Ibid*, p. 15.

12 *Ibid*, p. 5.

13 "He never wanted all the facts, which might stupefy him, but only enough to go on with, hardly enough to seem a fact at all." R. P. Blackmur, Introduction, *The Art of the Novel*, p. xv.

14 *The Art of the Novel*. p. 45.

15 *Ibid*, p. 312.

16 Richard Chase, "James's Ambassadors," *Twelve Original Essays on Great American Novels*, ed. Charles Shapiro (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1958), p. 136. He writes that "general lack of masculine reciprocation, especially in Strether himself, accounts in part for the somewhat tenuous quality--the softness at the center--of life as depicted in James's novel despite the wealth of reported observation."

17 F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1954), p. 196.

18 Leo Tolstoy, "What Is Art? and Other Essays," *The Modern Tradition*, pp. 300-309.

19 Unlike that of Virginia Woolf, who also rendered reality from a multiplicity of views, James's aim was not "synthesis" and hence the "design of a close approach to objective reality by means of numerous subjective impressions received by various individuals." In fact, one of the characteristics of James's sensibility is precisely the inability to engage in a real dialectical process or to reconcile conflicting if partial points of view. See, Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1957), p. 478.

20 Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," *The Future of the Novel*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 17.

21 F. W. Dupee records a fragment of a letter from Conrad to James, written after Conrad had finished reading *The American*: "I sat for a long while with the closed volume in my hand going over the preface in my mind and thinking--that is how it again, that's how it was done." *Henry James: His Life and Writings* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1956), p. 244.

22 Andre, Gide, *The Journals of Andre Gide: 1889-1949*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), I (1889-1924), pp. 206, 298. Also II (1924-1949), pp. 23, 94.

23 James Joyce, *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*, eds. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1959), p. 118.

24 Autin Warren, *Rage for Order: Essays in Criticism* (Michigan: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 1959), p. 120

25 "Le Mal?' we explain: you do yourself too much honour. This is not Evil; it is not the wrong; it is simply the nasty /" and so forth. On Poe, he writes that with "all due respect" to his "very Original genius," to "take him with more than a certain degree of seriousness is to lack seriousness oneself." And he says that for American readers, Baudelaire is "compromised" by having made himself Poe's disciple. His dismissal of Baudelaire is not altogether glib, however. He makes an interesting comparison between the French poet and Hawthorne to the effect that the former "knew evil not by experience, not as something within himself, but by contemplation and curiosity, as something outside himself," in comparison with Hawthorne, "who felt the thing at its source, deep in the human consciousness." Henry James, *French Poets and Novelists*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: The Universal Library, 1964), pp. 60-62.

26 *Mimesis*, p. 440.

27 Henry James, *Literary Reviews and Essays: On American, English, and French Literature*, ed. Albert Mordell (New York: Grove Press, 1957), p. 165.

28 *Ibid*, p. 146.

29 Moreover, they persisted: "Oscar Wilde is here--an unclean beast" (to Edwin Lawrence Godkin, 1882). Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Middle Years, 1882-1895* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1962), p. 31. Thirteen years later James was somewhat more temperate on Wilde: "He was never in the smallest degree interesting to me--but this hideous human history has made him so--in a manner" (to Edmund Gosse, April 8, 1895). *The Selected Letters of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956), p. 179.

30 *Literary Reviews*, p. 162.

31 "The Art of Fiction," *The Future of the Novel*, p. 26.

32 *For a New Novel*, p. 32.

33 *Ibid*, p. 33.

34 "The Myth of Sisyphus," *The Modern Tradition*, p. 826.

35 *For a New Novel*, p. 62.

36 *Ibid*, p. 64.

37 *The Modern Tradition*, p. 827.

38 From a letter to Rhoda Broughton, August 10, 1914: "Black and hideous to me is the tragedy that gathers, and I'm sick beyond cure to have lived on to see it. You and I, the ornaments of our generation, should have been spared this wreck of our belief that through the long years we had seen civilization grow and the worst become impossible It seems to me to *undo* everything, everything that was ours, in the most horrible retroactive way and the huge shining indifference of Nature strikes a chill to the heart and makes me wonder of what abysmal mystery, or villainy indeed, such a cruel smile is the expression."

To William Roughhead, September 30, 1914: "... so utterly broken off and disconnected, and all in a night, has become every blest old fact of the happy world made for our stricken sight, as we turn it back, by the simple circumstance of its not having been a perpetual black nightmare. However, *my* dark dream has lights, lurid, but extremely vivid; I never

wanted to live on to see the collapse of so many fond faiths, which makes all the past, with this hideous card all the while up its sleeve, seem now a long treachery, an unthinkable humbug." *The Selected Letters of Henry James*, pp. 251, 254-255.

39 *The Art of the Novel*, p. 290.

40 "The Art of Fiction," *The Future of the Novel*, pp. 5, 14.

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